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University of Bath

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Is access an answer?

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I have always been interested in the parallels between churches and libraries, as public spaces. The time-honoured traditions of sanctuary, a place of quiet retreat and free access to all-comers, are quite deeply ingrained in our attitudes. Of course, the time-honoured tradition came with cultural norms for behaviour: reverence, awe and respect. Monastic librarians were more likely to curse the delinquent readers than fine them. The public and politicians tend still to think broadly in traditional terms – the library as a place for community use, a free resource for scholars, untainted by considerations of cost, cross charging and bean counting. Libraries on a higher plane, where all that has to happen is for the doors to be flung open and the public will flood in and be transformed into a nation of autodidacts. Those who work in the contemporary university library tend to have a different perception. The modern university library is in many ways more like a supermarket, at least as far as supporting course students is concerned. The public's needs don't tend to map well onto university library collections, indeed, even one university's course needs can't be assumed to match another's. Whilst almost all professional academic librarians accept the need for co-operation in research support, it has been axiomatic for almost fifty years that each institution is responsible for the support of its own taught course students.

Such tensions have underlain decades of debates which can be characterised as the "Competition or co-operation" discussions, or "Fee or free". The politicians have increasingly advocated quite vague agendas for co-operation, especially and recently within the context of regional devolution. Higher education and library managers have responded with quite defined projects for co-operation, usually within a geographical or specialist parameter. The general ethos of the former is that co-operation is a "good thing"; the general ethos of the latter is one of mutual benefit. The majority of schemes to date have tended to be based on the principle of *open-ended reciprocity*; that is, the deal is done in principle and whether your library ends up as a net importer or net exporter makes no difference. The notable exception to this has been the RSLP's Access Scheme, where funding has been, and continues to be, distributed according to some measure of use and take-up.

This question of funding of access schemes is again one with polarised positions. Those who support open-ended reciprocity would argue that the Library has fixed costs which are already being covered and that offering free reference access, at the margins of those costs, is something that the Library can or must do to fulfil its obligations to the community. At the other extreme, the hard-nosed and hard pressed service managers may simply perceive any such concessions to outsiders as made at the expense of the quality of service they provide for the only people for whom they are funded, their staff and students. Since the collapse of the Net Book Agreement and the consequent redundancy of "The Library Licence" under which university libraries received a 10% discount from booksellers for the notional right of public access, I believe there has been a general hardening of attitudes of academic librarians to public access, despite the plethora of recent organised access schemes.

Yet if the fixed cost argument is not accepted, the complexity of accurate costing for access is considerable. Access users are almost always occasional users and will often make greater demands on advisory and support services than full members of the library. There are enormous cost variations in provision of materials by subjects. Access users of chemistry journals, though far and few between, still need ten times as much spending on the materials to satisfy their needs as access users who are interested in, say, European languages. Put more bluntly, access users are still limiting access to expensive resources which have been bought for limited access locally. A major problem for the future of access lies with electronic access, also. Where electronic licences allow “walk-in use”, (and not all do), providing the infrastructure for this can present significant resource issues. If an access control system to local networks exists, separate, free standing workstations may have to be provided for the outside users, or else the outside users have to be given their own authorisation and access to the local area network. The UK Computers Plus initiative of course may provide assistance here, if it comes to national fruition, as far as those from the university sector are concerned. The problem remains for the public and most access users will be either excluded from e-resources, or required to adopt a dual access approach to their needs, sourcing print locally and e-resources remotely from their own institution.

More recent access schemes are undoubtedly recognising more the limits of open-ended reciprocity and becoming more sophisticated. The recently agreed special arrangements for the Open University within UK Libraries Plus are an example in case, with arbitrary limits applied to the host library’s liability to accept OU students. The British Library, in a sensible and accommodating scheme, has undertaken to accept more openly referrals to its services, but crucially referrals which have been validated by information professionals within the referring library.

Such mediated access schemes do surmount the main problem of matching needs and collections. This works best for academic referrals between academic libraries, meaning that a student who is dependent on access arrangements for their library resources in architecture, or pharmacy, can be directed to one of the 20 or so institutions in each subject where their particular subject is taught and/or researched. The public users’ needs are not generally so easy to map on to academic libraries. Real issues of information literacy and suitability of collections arise. A truly experienced and independent researcher is unlikely to be fazed by a university library, but those without academic experience who are interested in generic areas like genealogy and local history, are very likely to need special assistance, or may suffer a very negative experience.

There seems no reason to doubt that access is still the answer for many researchers’ needs; it is simply impossible for any single library to provide entirely for all the needs of all the institution’s researchers. Electronic access and improved document delivery are probably making this objective more possible, at a cost, for published materials; it seems likely that researchers requiring unpublished, undigitised primary materials will have to travel to their materials for a long while yet.

It does not seem to me that open-ended access schemes are viable entirely to support taught students’ needs, unless quality is to be put at risk. The “parent” institution will

have to continue to accept the responsibility of providing learning resources for course students. As I have argued, it can not be assumed that the accessible local libraries can even support the access students' independent or project-based needs, and access arrangements to support these can only operate effectively if mediated by library and academic advisors, who can match collections to needs. From this point of view, professionally supported arrangements like INSPIRE seem to me to be the best answer, as far as the way forward with access goes.

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